The Role of Strategy Instruction in the Content Area- Social Studies

In content-area instruction, students use what they learn in their reading instruction. Reading instruction is designed to have students read and make sense of any text they encounter. Therefore, social studies teachers must be reading teachers, too. With this frame of mind, teaching and learning can reach new levels of effectiveness. Following are guidelines to follow before, during, and after reading social studies texts.

**Before Reading**

*“For maximum learning, students need prior knowledge about the topic being studied and they need to relate that prior knowledge to the contents of the passage.” (Readence, Moore, and Rickelman)*

The time it takes to build background knowledge is non-negotiable in supporting students’ growth as developing readers. Without this knowledge, students will consistently struggle to make connections with the text.

The KWHL strategy (*H stands for How*) allows readers an opportunity to think about a text before working with the actual print. As students activate their prior knowledge about the content and the vocabulary they will encounter, they can visualize, predict, and begin to make connections to the topic at hand—increasing their chances for strong comprehension.

**During Reading**

The focus of during-reading strategies is to develop and enhance metacognition—thinking skills. Because of tight schedules, teachers may be tempted to assign the during-reading portion of the lesson for homework. However, this makes it impossible to model, teach, and practice the effective during-reading strategies that boost students’ levels of comprehension and recall. Laura Robb states the following steps for during-reading instruction:

* Isolate and model a during-reading strategy, and make it visible for students.
* Have students practice the strategy during class time. Make sure the guided-practice sessions involve a topic from the curriculum or are related to it.

In order to teach the thinking processes that occur during reading, carefully model with think-alouds while reading parts of the text to your students. Next, use the following questions to provide guidance to students as they learn to think aloud on their own, with a partner, in a small-group, or in a whole-group setting:

**Questions for Think-Alouds**

* *How do I say that word?*
* *What does that word mean?*
* *What do I need to know about events leading up to this?*
* *Does this phrase, passage, or sentence make sense?*
* *Do I recall what I just read?*
* *How can I find the main idea?*
* *How can I figure out the implied meanings?*

**Vocabulary Development**

Comprehending new words is like dating: You’re introduced, take several months to get acquainted, and finally reach a point where you know each other. (Laura Robb, *Easy Mini-Lessons for Building Vocabulary*)

Challenging vocabulary can frustrate even the most accomplished reader. Quick interpretation of unfamiliar words is imperative for comprehension to remain unscathed. The sheer volume of words specific to the content areas makes it difficult to preteach each word and allow students time to internalize the meaning. Instead, the focus of vocabulary instruction should be to instill strategic tools to quickly decipher meaning—with the dictionary as last resort.

Ask yourself the following questions:

* *Do I preteach words that are central to the concept or topic?*
* *Do I use key words in my own speech?*
* *Do I model how words work in sentences?*
* *Do I help students move partially learned words into their active vocabularies?*
* *Do I offer students word-learning strategies they can use independently?*
* *Do I encourage students to read in my subject area?*

Adapted from L. Robb, *Teaching Reading in Science, Social Studies, and Math.*

**Vocabulary Development**

**Context Clues**

When a student is stuck on a word, we have all heard teachers say, “Go back and read the words around it. You can figure it out!” However, context clues are not always obvious. Save time in the long run and see better results by teaching students different types of clues.

**A Clear Definition or Synonym**

These clues are usually joined with a linking verb. Often, the author will follow the initial definition with more detailed and specific information.

Example**:** *A* ***Labrador Retriever*** *is a dog.*

**Concrete Examples**

The author provides the reader with an example or illustration that makes a difficult concept or idea clear. The example might be found in the same sentence or the sentences before or after. Signal words to look for are: ***such as, including, for instance, to illustrate, are examples of, other examples,*** and ***for example***.

Example: ***Air pollution*** *causes harm to the environment. Car exhaust and fumes from oil refineries, burning trash, and cigarette smoke are all examples of air pollution.*

**Contrast Clues**

Sometimes, authors will contrast a word with an antonym.

Example: *Unlike evergreen trees,* ***deciduous trees*** *drop their leaves each year.*

**Words or Phrases that Modify an Unfamiliar Word**

Sometimes adjectives, adverbs, or relative clauses contain clues to a word’s meaning. Signal words: ***who, which, that, whose,*** or ***whom****.*

Example: *The tree is* ***dormant****, which means “not active,” or “asleep.”*

**Conjunctions that Connect Relationships and Ideas**

Conjunctions can show relationships between words and allow the reader to link ideas. Signal words: ***and, but, or, nor, for, yet, if, since, even though, just as, when, whenever, until, although,*** and ***because***.

Example: *This* ***bioluminescence***, *or light, helps them find food or confuse prey.*

**Repetition of a Word**

Authors often repeat unfamiliar words, thus allowing the reader multiple opportunities to construct meaning.

Example: ***Mammals*** *include dogs, tigers, and humans.* ***Mammals*** *have lungs and breathe air.* ***Mammals*** *are warm-blooded.* ***Mammals*** *give birth to live young and nurse their babies with milk.* ***Mammals*** *have hair on their bodies.*

**Connecting to Readers’ Prior Knowledge**

Authors often use common ideas as scaffolding for less familiar ones. Good readers use what they already know to determine meanings of unknown words.

Example: *When you pick a piece of lint off your sweater, brush some dirt off your jeans, or smooth the wrinkles out of your shirt, be glad you don’t have to* ***preen*** *yourself with a beak as penguins do.*

**Writing Connections**

“When students are asked to write about content area concepts, they must select and then organize words to represent their understanding of what they have read. To accomplish this, they must relate, connect, and organize ideas from the text. They must also build interrelationships between the ideas stated in the texts and their own prior knowledge, background and purpose for reading.” (William G. Brazo and Michele L. Simpson)

Writing is an active process that encourages students to think critically and creatively about concepts they encounter in the content areas. Writing also allows a clear window into students’ understanding. Teachers are often able to use a writing sample to determine exactly where meaning falls apart for students.

When working with classroom writing activities, the assignment itself must be carefully planned. Connelly and Irving (1976) say that the single greatest cause for bad writing is bad writing assignments. Students must clearly understand:

* Topic
* Purpose
* Audience
* Options for planning
* Options for composition format
* Expectations for length, grammar, mechanics, and spelling
* Evaluation plan

**Academic Journals *(Marzano would call these Academic Notebooks)***

As Fulwiler (1987) explains, a student academic journal provides opportunities for discussion, small-group interaction, clarification, stimulation, and active learning. Following are two options for academic journals. Remember that these are effective tools only if modeled carefully. Students must understand the process and expectations.

**Double-Entry Journals**

These journals combine text examples with personal responses. On the left-hand side of the page, the student records a small excerpt from the text. On the right-hand side, he or she responds to the text with thoughts, questions, or comments. Students may also use illustrations to further clarify their thinking. To provide a common example, photocopy an excerpt and have students paste it into their journals. (Calkins, 1986)

**Personal-Response Journals**

This format also asks students to analyze text from a personal perspective in order to internalize the connections they make as they read. Students write about what they perceive in the text and then discuss the thoughts and feelings that stem from their perceptions. Suggested personal-response questions are: *What aspect of the text affected or interested you most? What are your feelings about this aspect of the text? What experiences could you share that would help others understand why you feel the way you do?*

**Research**

Students can use what they learn while reading and studying different topics in social studies to create written and visual representations of their knowledge. In the past, this was often limited to simple handwritten reports. Today, students can let their imaginations soar with word-processing programs, multi-media computer programs, digital scrapbooks, and other available technology applications. Student writing can be incorporated into each medium, and older peers or parent volunteers can be trained to help students one on one with their projects.